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ABSTRACT

In the many different stages of the writing process, teachers of composition need to be sensitive toward cultural differences which may exist between them and their students. Large numbers of foreign students participate in writing courses in American colleges, and research indicates that the minority student population will increase sharply in the coming years. Numerous scholars are calling for a revision of the canon taught by English faculty to reflect multicultural trends in American society itself. Multicultural considerations apply specifically to writing classes also. Teachers and students can benefit from the realization that all cultures contribute to knowledge, and that students should participate in the making of knowledge in the classroom. The type of writing that focuses on the student as maker of knowledge has been labelled "expressive." Today, although most research is pointing to a rhetorical focus, it is still possible to reconcile rhetorical writing with expressive writing modes in the context of the writing classroom. Students can be encouraged to draw from their personal experiences, choose topics of personal interest, do most of the talking in conferences, read materials from various cultural perspectives, and thus have a say in their writing education. There remain difficulties with setting up a writing class based on a multicultural approach, however, including the recent negative press, but teachers must remove impediments that obstruct students' learning and development. (HB)

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A Multicultural Approach to Writing Assignments

Last year while teaching a class in sophomore composition at Texas Christian University, my first class as a teaching assistant, I had my initial epiphany regarding a sensitivity toward multiculturalism in the writing class. During a conference with a student of mine from Hong Kong, I sat back in the office chair with my legs crossed and my fingers interlocked behind my head, hoping to convey the impression that the conference is an informal place where writers talked about the nitty gritty of writing. While this student explained what he was planning to work on for the next paper, a paper about his homeland, he mentioned rather politely yet pointedly that it is a severe insult in his culture to cross one's legs or otherwise make a prominent display of the bottom of one's feet toward another person. Resisting the impulse to violently slam my foot to the floor and apologize profusely for the social faux pas, I did straighten up and hide both feet under the desk. I'm not sure what the student got out of this writer's conference, but I came away with an awareness that in the many different stages of the writing process we teachers of composition need to be sensitive toward cultural differences.

Generally, I look for ways to open up learning for my students, ways to help them find sources, ways to help them

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respond to each other's writing, and so on. And since, according to an education journal, the minority student population will increase more sharply in the next two years than in previous years, educators need to provide opportunities for these students to learn by recognizing cultural traits (Bender 13). In addition to minority groups who live in the United States, there is a large number of foreign students who do not, on the average, drop out but who may have some trouble adjusting to American schools.

There has been quite a bit published in both scholarly journals and the popular press the last few years regarding multiculturalism in the curriculum. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese in 1984 writes a precaution against accepting as required curriculum the "Great Tradition" since it is actually a product of history, itself constructed by particular groups to meet their particular needs (Fox-Genovese 191). She adds that many history teachers have better luck motivating their students when these students write a family history or autobiography, a personal approach to history (197). The idea, then, is that many students feel excluded by the traditional history curriculum. Fox-Genovese certainly doesn't advocate abandoning the Great Tradition altogether, and I'm not sure I do either, but we should realize that, strictly followed, a canon of subject matter is stifling and exclusive. Also, in his book What Is English, Peter Elbow recounts the events of the three-week English Coalition Conference of 1987. E.D. Hirsch was invited to the conference to defend his list of what we need to know, and Elbow invests large

parts of his book showing how most of the teachers at the conference took exception to the idea of a canon. The canon precludes the assumption that we are better off reading the same books and experiencing the same things. But a prescribed list of items that everyone in a culture should know excludes much more than it includes, to the detriment of education. For instance, participants at the conference claimed they were attracted to the English profession because of a deep personal connection to literature, so more cultural variety in literature would certainly lead to more cultural variety in educators. A more recent example is from the March 1991 issue of College English, wherein Gregory Jay claims that multiculturalism reflects that our nationalism must be reevaluated and that we should examine closely those subjects that have formed our cultural boundaries (Jay 266). And Catherine Stimpson comments on the fairly consistent recognition of multicultural topics and writers at university presses (Stimpson 28).

Multicultural considerations apply specifically to writing classes also, not just to history and literature. Cultural dissonance contributes to the relatively high dropout rate of minority students because those students feel alienated from the school environment (Dean 24-25). In contrast to the widely held belief that many minorities fail in school because of a detrimental home environment, many fail because of fear of acceptance in the scholastic setting (36). Not only does the writing conference require cultural sensitivity but the peer

editing group does too. Many East Asians feel uncomfortable about making negative statements to peers, and some Middle Easterners are reluctant to share personal writing with anyone (Allaei and Connor 24). This is not to say that members of a particular ethnic group are predictable or act in uniform ways. In examining the concept of differing cultures, we must become aware of particular customs but, at the same time, not fall into the attitude that all of group "A" does "B."

Teachers and students alike would benefit more with the realization that all cultures can contribute to knowledge than with the conviction that the teacher should force feed knowledge from the teacher's own background (Gomez and Grant 33). Elbow states that teachers should consider students makers of knowledge rather than simply receivers of a pre-packaged gift (Elbow 153). In fact, Elbow goes a bit farther and accuses teachers at large of forcing students to depend too heavily on reading outside data and not enough on their own personal experiences (Elbow 184). This periodic focus on the student as the center of knowledge making finds worth in the student's own cultural background. The student has the opportunity to realize that personal cultural information is, indeed, valuable in a scholastic setting. Richard Fulkerson labels this type of writing "expressive" (Fulkerson 409).

Fulkerson posits that there are essentially four philosophical value systems in composition instruction, and every teacher privileges one of these systems whether consciously or

not. A formalist values the text, a mimeticist stresses accuracy of the information, an expressivist valorizes the authentic voice and personal topics of the writer, and a rhetoricist values the effectiveness of the writing's argument and audience awareness (409). Fulkerson claims that now most writing journals point to the rhetorical axiology as a consensus. So I hope to reconcile both the expressive philosophy, as it is conducive to multiculturalism, with the rhetoricist philosophy because it takes into account most strongly the idea of a discourse community (417). With this in mind, we should consider Elbow's idea that student writers can be a viable locus of knowledge by beginning with the idea that their own writing is valuable. He maintains that some class meetings should begin with imaginative writing rather than a written response to reading in order to coax students to delve into their rich pasts (186). Elbow adds, though, that students must fight for their own point of view while still appreciating other points of view (31). In this way, then, the students, no matter the culture, have the opportunity to put forth their own ideas as a worthwhile starting point. Then they can revise their papers as they consider what they want their audience to know. The double benefit is that students can write from the familiarity of their own backgrounds and remain conscious of their audience, their discourse community.

Elbow's argument is similar to Paulo Freire's in Pedagogy of the Oppressed. Freire advocates that the authority figure relinquish authority so that the oppressed might develop into

fulfilled human beings. For this relationship to take place, though, the teacher must see the good in each student and have faith in the student's creative power and desire to learn (Freire 62). A student's personal background is important, then, and a worthwhile basis for writing assignments. Once the students feel that they have some authority in their education, they will take more responsibility for that education. If the students are allowed to do most of the talking during a writing conference, and if they are permitted to choose their own writing topics without the feeling that there are more important topics out there, the students may then feel motivated to produce clear and vibrant writing for their audiences.

Not many teachers would advocate completely abandoning outside reading as part of the writing class agenda. Students need to read in order to extend themselves scholastically and to appreciate different points of view. Although there is worth in expressive writing, there is also worth in the treasure of stories, poems, essays and other writing collected in textbooks and anthologies. Recognizing the necessity for cultural diversity, several textbook companies have made the effort to include readings from different cultures. For example, Macmillan's Crossing Cultures: Readings for Composition has selections by Native Americans, African-Americans, Europeans, and so forth. These selections are divided into sections with names like "Growing Up" and "Families." And each author has a paragraph or two of biographical information. Although the

criticism of some of these texts is that they simply take material from various cultures and pound them into a format of the dominant culture. such a method still gives students a fairly good opportunity to connect their reading with their own background as well as with the backgrounds of others. The thrust here is to help the student writers feel good about their own culture while at school because they see published writers with their same ethnicity, but at the same time to appreciate diverse cultures.

With the large number of cultural groups represented in campuses across the country, and with the varying degrees of assimilation into other cultures, it is difficult to go about setting up a multicultural approach to writing classes. Adding to this difficulty is the negative press recently generated by the term "multiculturalism." For example, Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.'s. new book The Disuniting of America proposes to show how emphasis on other cultures will disrupt the American education process. But Schlesinger confuses multiculturalism with radical ethnocentrism in his examples. As teachers we will have constantly make ourselves constantly aware of our students' backgrounds and consider carefully what they write about themselves. The difficulty is worthwhile, though, as we composition teachers busy ourselves removing impediments that obstruct our students' learning and development. And among those impediments is the idea that there is one way to look at life, a way that promotes the background of one particular group and that

those who are different need to join up or drop out. I'm fortunate that my former student from Hong Kong, rather than quietly taking offense and permitting instability in our working relationship, had the patience to explain to me that I do not always know enough about students and, thus, about composition pedagogy.

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